The History of the PhD at the University of Sydney

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This piece came about because Professor Frank Nicholas, now Emeritus Professor, asked me to undertake research on a couple of former students at the University, whom Professor Nicholas believed to be amongst the first PhD students at the University of Sydney. Those students were Peter J Claringbold (Veterinary Science's first conferred Doctor of Philosophy) and J Stuart F Barker (who was conferred in 1962). In trying to work out whether they were among the first, I researched the introduction of the PhD at the University and prepared this overview on this history of postgraduate students based on the records available in the University of Sydney Archives. My research stopped at 1962.

Beginning of the PhD Research Degree at the University of Sydney

Prior to the war, the research degree of PhD had not been established in any Australian university. Then in October 1944, almost 100 years after the establishment of the University of Sydney, the Professorial Board discussed starting the Doctor of Philosophy degree on the request of Professor LA Cotton, Department of Geology. Many Board members were against the introduction of the PhD and, although it was hoped a decision could be made by December 1944, Faculty's responses were not finalised until 1946. Agriculture agreed so long as they received adequate resources and Engineering accepted the idea if the Masters Research Degree was considered too. However, the Faculty of Science said that they would only want to run PhDs when most departments in the University of Sydney had strong graduate schools and Veterinary Science was not in favour of starting the degree yet either. The Arts Faculty was also hostile as they had previously discussed and dismissed the idea.

The Professorial Board were not deterred by these reactions and chose to discuss starting PhD courses at the University. They referred the idea to a committee of Deans, who agreed that the PhD should be set up within all the Faculties using common regulations similar to those used in Oxford and Cambridge. It was stated that a PhD degree would be a period of extended graduate training under supervision. It was decided that a PhD would last for just two years and require the student to attend full time. This is in contrast to the 3-4 years full time study which is expected today and that may be extended to take 6-8 years if the student chooses to study part time.

By the end of 1947, the PhD was established in the Science and Science-based faculties, but not in the Arts. In August 1947, the Maths and Geography factions of the Arts Faculty proposed a motion to instate the PhD research degree, but they were outvoted and the Faculty as a whole remained against the idea. It is believed that both the Arts and the Economics Faculties were more in favour of their already established Masters courses and therefore did not see the need for a PhD as well. However, they did eventually take students on for PhDs, with their first conferment occurring in 1959.

The Research Degrees of Doctor of Letters, Doctor of Science and Doctor of Veterinary Science had already gained great esteem and continued to do so throughout the initial period of the PhD, always being listed and presented first in Degree Conferment ceremonies.

Notwithstanding this, by 1950, there were 20 students enrolled in the university to do a PhD and this was one-fifth of all the students who were enrolled to do postgraduate research degrees. In comparison, in 2007 there were 85 (of whom 71 were full time) students enrolled to do PhDs just in the Faculty of Veterinary Science!

The first person to complete a PhD has been claimed to be Eleanora C. Gyarfas, from the Faculty of Science. Her thesis was called 'Studies into chemistry and optical properties of the complexes of iron, ruthenium, osmium and nickel with 2:2' - dipyridyl and (1, 10), phenanthroline' and her status as Doctor of Philosophy was conferred at 2.30pm on Wednesday 2 May, 1951.

However, she was not the only scientist to gain a PhD that day. She was joined by George F. Humphrey, who had completed his research on 'The metabolism of the adductor muscle of saxostrea commercialis'. As the first conferred students, they received their PhDs from the Dean of the Faculty of Science, Professor N.A. Burges, on what must have been a proud moment both for them and for the Faculty of Science.

Also, in the same year and with his conferment actually preceding the two scientists, William H. Wittrick became the first Engineer to gain a PhD in his Faculty at the University of Sydney. He received his at 10am on Saturday 28 April 1951 and it was presented by the Faculty of Engineering's Dean, Professor A.V. Stephens. His thesis was called 'Torsion and bending of swept and tapered wings with ribs parallel to the route'.

Other first PhDs conferred before 1962:

Veterinary Science –
Peter J. Claringbold: Thesis – Study of the action of hormones on the vagina.
Conferred – 3pm, Thursday 28 April, 1955
Presented by – Dean of Veterinary Science, Professor R.M.C. Gunn.

Agriculture –
Dilbagh Athwal: Thesis – Genetics of resistance to stem rust (Puccinia graminis tritici) and leaf rust (Puccinia triticina) of wheat, with particular reference to the identification of genes involved.

Harland Kerr: Thesis – Studies of the pathogen Melampsora Iini (Pers.) Lev. in Australia, with particular reference to physiological specialisation, and the genetics of host resistance.

Conferred – 3pm, Thursday 28 April, 1955
Presented by – Dean of Faculty of Agriculture, Professor J.R.A. McMillan.

Arts –
John P. Sutcliffe: Thesis – Hypnotic behaviour: fantasy or simulation?

Conferred – 3pm, Tuesday 21 April, 1959
Presented by – Dean of Faculty of Arts, Professor A.J. Dunston.

Since 1962, the research degree of Doctor of Philosophy has gone from strength to strength. Each year many students embark upon new and exciting research whilst working towards becoming an expert in their specific field. A PhD candidature can be challenging and stimulating, add greatly to the international knowledge base in that area and provide the student with a multitude of transferable skills to take with them as they step out into the world as a Doctor of Philosophy. Currently numbers enrolled greatly exceed those of the early days – 2008 figures state there are 3,053 students enrolled either full or part time in research doctorate degrees at the University of Sydney. Government and University schemes are focussed on attracting evermore postgraduate students and Faculties are continually under pressure to recruit more candidates, all of which means that the growth of postgraduate studies may continue for some time yet.

YEAR	Agriculture	Arts	Dentistry	Engineering	Science	Veterinary Science
1951				1	2	
1952				1	4	
1953					4	
1954					3	
1955	2				12	1
1956					4	
1957	2			2	10	
1958					7	
1959	1	1		5	17	
1960	2	4		3	11	2
1961	1				12	3
1962	1	1	1		5	2

Number of PhDs conferred in different Faculties up to and including 1962

References

Connell, W.F., Sherington, G.E., Fletcher, S.H., Turney, C. and Bygott, U. (1995). *Australia's First: A History if the University of Sydney*, Vol 2 1940–1990. p 47-49, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney.

Personal Communication – Julia Mant, University of Sydney Archives.

Graduation Ceremony Programs from 1951–1962, in University of Sydney Archives (possibly an incomplete set).

The University of Sydney Planning and Statistics website http://www.planning.usyd.edu.au/statistics/